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ABSTRACT

Developing a vision of the future and deciding how an organization will look and function in that future are essential ingredients of planning for organizational success. This handbook offers tools for strategic planning and conducting needs-assessment studies. Chapter 1 describes societal changes in the United States and its impact on education. Chapter 2 describes strategic planning and its six steps: (1) assessing the external environment; (2) assessing internal capacity; (3) developing a vision for the future; (4) developing goals and objectives; (5) implementing the plan; and (6) evaluating progress and revising plans. The third chapter offers guidelines for conducting an environmental assessment through the use of surveys, reporting procedures, interviews, community forums, the charette process, and the delphi technique. Tips for reviewing the process are included in chapter 4. The epilogue contains information about using strategic planning in community education. (LMI)

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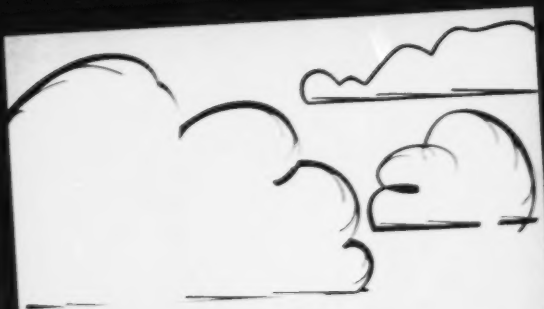

STRATEGIC PLANNING AND NEEDS ASSESSMENT

for schools & communities

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Strategic Planning and Needs Assessment for Schools and Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Planning is a natural activity of man reflected in daily conversations. *What are we having for dinner? What will you do this weekend? When are you going on vacation?* And every parent of a teenager recognizes the wail, *But, Mom, Dad, I had plans!*

In classrooms, programs, schools, and districts, planning is a continuous process of daily functioning. Yet, the term "strategic planning," conjures for many an image of a complex, mysterious activity carried out for large corporations by expert consultants. In reality, a strategic plan provides the context and strategies that enable daily planning and decision making to attain long-range goals.

The act of planning has been described as a process for dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity.[1] The rapid manner in which our society—including the environment of schools and communities—has changed over the last several decades has led some to say that traditional planning methods are insufficient; we need to imagine the future. McCune[2] considers developing a vision of the future a natural part of the strategic planning process, while Ellis and others,[3] consider the visioning process a paradigm shift in planning practices. In either case, developing a vision of the future and how an organization will look and function in that future have become essential ingredients in planning for success.

At the national level, Goals 2000 offers a vision of our educational future. These goals have been adopted

by almost all states and many local school districts. State and local agencies must now design their own individual strategies for attaining these goals. Still, economic reality has forced many localities to doubt their ability to afford all the services necessary to meet their current needs. Difficult choices must be made, and priorities must be established. Strategic planning can be an effective tool in making these choices and guiding our activities toward the goal of a prosperous future for all.

NOTES

1. Ken M. Young, "Educational Planning," in Harold J. Burbach and Larry E. Decker, eds. *Planning and Assessment in Community Education*. Midland, Michigan: Pendell Publishing Company, 1977, p. 33.
2. Shirley D. McCune. *Guide to Strategic Planning for Educators*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1986.
3. Timothy J. Ellis, Peter J. Murk, and Gordon Y. Ipson, "Community Visioning: Generating Support and Action for Community Education," *Community Education Journal*, XX, 3 (Spring 1993), pp. 16-20.

CHAPTER 1

THE CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

A 1940s film featuring public educator Frank Manley and philanthropist Charles Stewart Mott touted a "new concept" that was being implemented in Flint, Michigan: community education. Its mission was to identify and address the social and educational needs of the community.

As a philosophy, community education had its roots in John Dewey's *School and Society*, which viewed schools as having a broader role than just educating children. That role was one of social responsibility to improve the community. As a practice, modern community education had a simple beginning in Flint in the 1930s. Manley, a physical education teacher, felt frustrated by the coexistence of locked school yards and children with nothing to do after school and in the summer. Out of his frustration grew a collaborative relationship with Mott, a Flint industrialist, who donated $6,000 to keep the schools open. Thus, modern community education was born in Flint, based on Manley and Mott's shared concept: Give kids something to do, and they won't get into trouble.[1]

This same theme is reemerging today. In a recent article, "Unlock School Doors to Fight Crime," U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno and Senators Bill Bradley and John Danforth call for the creation of community schools

to provide a safe and supervised environment for children after the traditional school day and to help stem the tide of juvenile violence by reaching kids "before they cross the line into lawlessness."[2]

Since the development of the Flint model, the original standard against which other programs were measured, community education has grown both philosophically and practically. In fact, the world—and America's place in it—are very different than they were. The nation's industrial strength and moral certitude were at the heart of its success, in World War II and the economic boom that followed. In the 1950s, educational planning was synonymous with facilities planning, to meet the needs of an expanding K-12 population. The typical American family consisted of a working father, a homemaker mother, and two or more school-age children. As a nation, we were secure about our standing as the world's leading nation economically, militarily, scientifically, and morally. We believed that we had the best educational system in the world and that our technological achievements could be challenged by no one.

Our complacence was shattered by a Soviet satellite on October 4, 1957. It didn't matter that the 137 pound Sputnik I carried little scientific equipment; the fact of its launch had a profound impact on the nation. Americans were shocked to learn that another nation could be more advanced in any area of endeavor. Sputnik marked the beginning of the realization that we could not maintain our place in the world by simply continuing to behave—and educate—in the same way; we needed to plan for the future. The initial shock of Sputnik led to the first of a series of educational reform efforts. Education—specifically educa-

tion in math and science—became a prime concern of the federal government, of states, and of communities.

The initial successes of our space program restored our sense of pride. Americans entered space, orbited the earth, and walked on the moon. Educational concerns receded as first Vietnam and then runaway inflation captured the American psyche. Planning for the future became a low-key activity in education

Many of today's problems are the result of our collective failure to plan. For too long, we've ignored what John Goodlad describes as the "destruction of the fabric of American society that has been going on around us at a frighteningly rapid rate."[3] Among the things we know about our present environment are the social and economic costs associated with dropping out of high school. Those costs can be measured in limited occupational and economic prospects, the need for greater government assistance, higher crime rates, and a general disenfranchisement from society.[4] We know that health problems impede learning. We know which areas are critical to our future, the areas our educational policy must address: educational achievement; postsecondary programs, employment and training; community and parental involvement; health care; and buildings and facilities.[5] We recognize that communities, through public and private cooperation, can develop comprehensive and coordinated systems to ensure that all young people and their families have access to a full array of developmental, preventive, and remedial services.[6]

Community educators are responding to their changing communities. Even the classic community education model in Flint has been restructured to reflect the changes wrought by economics and demo-

Changes in the Job Market

The United States began as an agricultural society and became a great power during the industrial age. By 1950, fully 55 percent of all workers were in blue-collar industries, and only 12 percent in agriculture.

By the 1980s, the percentage of industrial workers had fallen to 24 percent, and only 3 percent of the workforce was involved in agriculture. The decade saw the rise of the service sector: 30 percent of all workers were in service industries, and 56 percent of them were classified as information workers.

graphics. Change is apparent in all aspects of our national life.[7]

Economically, the nation has changed. After its agrarian beginning, our national economy was divided: by the time of the Civil War, the Northeast had entered the industrial age while the South clung to agriculture. By the turn of the century, half of all workers were involved in agriculture. But by 1950, only 12 percent of U.S. workers were in agriculture, while 55 percent were in blue-collar industries. In the 1980s, the percentage of industrial workers fell to 24 percent, and agricultural workers to 3 percent. The service sector had become dominant in employment. Thirty percent of all workers were in service industries, and 56 percent of them were classified as information workers.[8]

We have become a debtor nation with a chronic and growing trade deficit. The economic growth of the 1980s was financed by deficit spending, leaving us with a debilitating national debt. Our businesses complain that job applicants lack basic skills. As we are transformed from a manufacturing nation to a service economy, residents of our cities are becoming stratified, with one group trapped in the welfare system and

another reaping the success of the high technology and information job boom. Many urban ecosystems are severely challenged by uneven growth, cultural diversity, extreme poverty, declining financial support, and shrinking job opportunities for all except those with a strong educational preparation.[9]

Our educational system, effective in training for the industrial era, is anachronistic in the knowledge society. The current wave of educational reform is based on economic considerations and our weakening position in international trade is one of the driving forces behind it. [10] Today, business is looking to education to provide them workers who are highly educated, flexible, and creative.

But education does not take place in a vacuum; schooling exists in a societal context. Education is affected by the age distribution, ethnic makeup, and socio-economic status of our population; conditions within our cities; and our willingness to invest in the future.

Families have changed. Mom at home, dad at work, and two children in school described 60 percent of all households in 1955, but only six percent in 1992. While the number of households increased by 15.5 percent between 1980 and 1990, the number of married couples with school-age children declined by 1.7 percent. The number of single-parent households increased by 21.2 percent for female-headed households and 87.2 percent for male-headed households. By 1990, the largest percentage of households consisted of married couples with no school-age children."[11]

Poverty, once primarily a problem of the elderly, is now a problem of women and children. In the decade from 1979 to 1989, there was a four percent increase in the

number of children living in poverty. In 1989, more than 20 percent of all children were poor. [12] The percentage varied greatly by ethnic group. While 15.4 percent of white children lived in poverty in 1989, 38.2 percent of Hispanic and 43.8 percent of black children were poor. Poverty is also a function of the type of household in which children live. By the early 1990s, 63 percent of children living with unmarried mothers and 34 percent living with divorced mothers were in poverty. Only 11 percent of children living with both parents were classified as poor. [13]

Changes in Families

In the 1950s, the typical American family consisted of a working father, a homemaker mother, and two or more school-age children. This description fit 60 percent of households in 1955, but only six percent of households in 1992. While dual-parent families declined, single-parent households increased.

The typical household in the 1990s is a married couple with no school-age children.

The majority of Americans live in metropolitan areas. By the mid-1980s, three out of 10 urban children lived in poverty; 38 percent dropped out of high school. In our cities, 45 percent of the need for licensed child care was unfilled. Of all births, 14.6 percent were to teenage mothers, nearly three-fourths of whom were unmarried; infants died at the rate of 12.6 per thousand. [14] And these things were happening to children not just in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C., but in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Lincoln, Nebraska; Alexandria, Virginia; New Haven, Connecticut; and Nashville, Tennessee.

More than 22 percent of all Americans today and approximately 25 percent of the under-18 population

are minority. While the size of the youth population has been relatively stable during the last decade, the proportion of Hispanics and blacks within that population has increased. In its U.S. Minority Profile, the Center for the Study of Social Policy projects that by the year 2000, "nearly one-third of all school-age children will be from minority populations."[15] The U.S. Census Bureau's projection for a 0.5 percent increase in the total youth population between 1990 and 2010 includes a 3.8 percent decrease in the number of white youths. By 2010, the total minority youth population will increase by 4.4 million, while the total white youth population will decrease by 3.8 million. [16]

America is an aging land. The baby boomers of the post-World War II era are middle-aged. In the decade from 1980 to 1990, the 35-to-44 age group grew by more than 33 percent. The echo effect of the baby boom was modest; the children of baby boomers were born at a lower rate and over a longer period of time than their parents.

Looking ahead, 1995 U.S. Census figures project that, for the first time, the elderly will soon outnumber the school-aged, and there will be increased competition between the needs of these two groups." Our social security system was designed to fit an opposite demographic pattern: a small number of retirees supported by a large number of workers. In 1940, 17 workers supplied the social security benefits for one retiree. In 1990, the worker-retiree ratio had dropped to three to one; it will be two to one by the year 2000. And the next generation of workers will be increasingly drawn from poor, minority, and single-parent households. They will enter an economic marketplace that demands highly educated, technology-oriented workers—

and they are from the populations most likely to fail in school.

America is a violent land. Murder is now the leading cause of death in the U.S. among black, male teenagers; guns are the fourth most common cause of death in the nation, following accidents, cancer, and heart disease. Foreign governments warn their citizens about the dangers of travel in the U.S. Cities are buying guns from teenagers—$50 a piece, no questions asked.[18] The disintegration of the family and the increase in youth violence have led to discussions of where and by whom children should be taught a value system that respects individual life.

The Face of the Nation

Today, more than 22 percent of all Americans and 25 percent of youths are minority. And the percentage of minority youth is increasing. By the year 2000, nearly one-third of all school-age children will be from minority.

While the changing marketplace demands highly educated, technology-oriented workers, the next generation of workers is increasingly poor, minority, and from single-parent households those most likely to fail in school.

America is an aging land. The baby boomers of the post-World War II era are middle-aged. In the decade from 1980 to 1990, the 35-to-44 age group grew by more than 33 percent

These demographics have economic consequences. The social security system was designed to support a small number of retirees financed by a large number of workers. In 1940, 17 workers supported one retiree. By 1990, the worker-retiree ratio was three to one; it is expected to be two to one by the year 2000.

Employment demands are changing. Rote learning may have been good preparation for rote assembly lines; new methodologies are needed to prepare students to become continuous learners. An increasing need for worker training and retraining is leading many educators toward the community education concept of lifelong learning in a learning community.

The societal context of education is recognized at the national level. Anne Lewis points to three major themes that are at the heart of the current administration's approach to educational policy: (1) high expectations for all students; (2) bottom-up initiatives with the federal government providing direction, states and districts setting policy, and the local school responsible for implementation; and (3) recognition of the need to interconnect the services for families and children, for example, by providing health checkups for elementary school children.[19] Several of the goals in *Goals 2000: Educate America* address societal issues: school readiness; a safe, disciplined, drug-free school environment; and creation of a well-trained workforce. We now recognize that effective parenting is not necessarily a natural skill, but is one of many skills people can work to develop as they go through various stages of life. The School-to-Work Act of 1993 provides a framework for helping students adjust to another life stage—their transition from school to the workplace.

As we address the formidable challenges of a rapidly changing environment, we need to do more than assess and address a community's current needs. We need to imagine the future, anticipate its requirements, and develop a vision of what our society will be like, and what education's role will be. We need the tools of strategic planning.

NOTES

1. Jack D. Minzey and Clyde E. LeTarte. *Community Education: From Program to Process to Practice.* Midland, MI: Pendell Publishing Co., 1979, p.7.
2. Janet Reno, Bill Bradley, and John Danforth, "Unlock School Doors To Fight Crime," *USA Today,* June 16, 1994, Opinion Page.
3. John Goodlad in Larry Decker and Donna Schoeny, "National Educational Leaders Speak Out on Community Education," *Community Education Journal,* XIX(2), Winter 1992, p. 17.
4. E. McDill, G. Nattriello, and A. Pallas, "A Population at Risk: Potential Consequences of Tougher School Standards for Student Dropouts," *American Journal of Education, 94* (1986), p. 136.
5. The Council of the Great City Schools. *Challenges to Urban Education: Results in the Making.* Washington, D.C., 1987, p. 8.
6. The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship. *The Forgotten Half: Pathways to Success for America's Youth and Young Families.* Washington, DC, 1988, p. 7.
7. See Hugh Rohrer and Dan Cady, "Community Education: Adapting to the Needs of an Urban Community," in Larry E. Decker and Valerie A. Romney, eds. *Educational Restructuring and the Community Education Process.* Alexandria, VA: National Coalition for Community Education, 1992.
8. Shirley D. McCune. *Guide to Strategic Planning for Educators.* Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1986, p. 2.
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10. Theodore L. Gross. *Partners in Education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1988.
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12. Center for the Study of Social Policy, *Kids Count Data Book*. Washington, DC: Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1991, p. 9.
13. "The War Over Family Values," *U.S. News & World Report*, June 8, 1992, p. 35.
14. The United States Conference of Mayors, The United States Conference on City Human Services Officials. *A Status Report on Children in America's Cities, A 52-City Survey*. October 1988, pp. 4-5.
15. Center for the Study of Social Policy, *p.* 10.
16. U.S. Census Bureau as cited in Larry E. Decker & Associates. *Home-School-Community Relations: Trainers Manual and Study Guide*, Charlottesville, VA: Mid-Atlantic Center for Community Education 1994, p. 16.
17. 1995 U.S. Bureau of the Census projections reported by Telnet on-line "Daily Report Card" of a National Update on America's Education Goals, a service of the National Education Goals Panel, Barbara A. Pape, publisher, March 1995.
18. A program established in Atlanta, GA, as reported on CNN, November 24, 1993.
19. Anne C. Lewis, "The Administration's Education Agenda," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 75(3), November 1993, pp. 196-197.

CHAPTER 2

STRATEGIC PLANNING

What Is It?

Strategic planning is a process to provide direction and meaning to day-to-day activities. It examines an organization's values, current status, and environment, and relates those factors to the organization's desired future state, usually expressed in five- to ten-year time periods. The organization may be a program, school, school district, public or private agency, or any other institution that wishes to control its future. If the organization existed in a static environment in which no change was necessary or desired, there would be no need for strategic planning. But, our environment *is* changing—demographically, economically, and culturally. Thus, strategic planning is both a reaction to, and a tool for adapting to, those changes and creating an organization's future within the context of change.

Strategic Planning

Strategic planning is a practical process for dealing with the ambiguities of the environment. Its purpose it to move the organization from being a pawn to changing events to being a proactive participant, making decisions about and acting to create its own future. It requires organizational flexibility to adapt and revise as conditions change, and a willingness to move beyond obsolete paradigms.

Goff describes strategic planning as the process of responding to the results of an institution's assessment of its external and internal environments. Its purpose is to help the institution capitalize on its strengths while minimizing its weaknesses, and to take advantage of opportunities and defend against threats. Tregoe's definition begins with a vision of what the organization should be. In his view, strategic planning provides a framework that guides choices; the choices in turn will determine the future nature and direction of an organization.[1] Pfeiffer and others also begin with envisioning an organization's future. Strategic planning to them is the process of developing the procedures and operations necessary to achieve that future. They differentiate between long-term planning, which is reactive, and strategic planning, which allows an organization to create its future.[2] Barry defines strategic planning for nonprofit organizations as "finding the best future for your organization and the best path to reach that destination."[3]

McCune describes strategic planning as a process for organizational renewal and transformation. She identifies another difference between long-range planning and strategic planning: in long-range planning, goals and projections are based on the assumption of organizational stability, while in strategic planning, the role of the organization is examined within the context of its environment. Strategic planning provides the means for an organization to adapt its services and activities to meet changing needs in its environment. It provides a framework not only for the improvement of programs but also for the restructuring of programs, management, and collaborations, and for evaluation of the organization's progress in these efforts.[4]

Why Do It?

In the simplest terms, a strategic plan can help improve performance. School staff—or members of any organization—can become so bogged down in routine functioning and daily challenges, they can lose sight of the organization's purpose. A strategic plan can not only refocus members' sense of purpose, but can stimulate future-oriented thinking based on a shared sense of mission. Collaboration between members of an organization is more effective when everyone is working within the same set of assumptions and toward the same goals.

Vision, planning, and goal-setting have consistently proven to be positive influences on organizational performance.[5] Especially in times of limited financial resources, a strategic plan's specification of purpose, goals, and objectives can be used as a prioritization system for allocating personnel and funds. It can help an organization think through the difficult choices necessitated by restricted budgets.

Budgetary limitations are not the only challenge that organizations must meet. Today's educational system must cope with changes in demographics, family patterns, and workplace requirements. Many of these changes provide interrelated challenges to the system. Viewing them as a web of problems may be overwhelming; putting them in the perspective of an organized strategic plan allows the organization to deal with them in a coordinated way, addressing pieces of the problems as part of a progression toward a total solution. This allows the organization to influence its environment and take control of its future, rather than reacting to it.

Strategic planning is not an appropriate activity for every organization at all times. When an organization is in crisis, when its very existence is in question, the crisis must be addressed before any other activity is initiated. Strategic planning makes no sense when the organization's future is in doubt. Some groups of people, or inspired leaders, have a natural ability to respond quickly and effectively to new challenges and opportunities, making strategic planning superfluous. However, for most organizations and most organization members, strategic planning provides a powerful framework and impetus for action.

Developing a strategic plan can be expensive, especially in terms of personnel time and energy. This cost must be considered in relation to the expected benefits. For some organizations or units within an organization, strategic planning is a burden imposed by a higher authority—a funding source or an umbrella organization. If there is no internal commitment to the plan, and no intent to implement it, strategic planning is a waste of time and energy.

In sum, strategic planning is for those who are willing to be honest, who want to focus on revitalization, and who are committed to influencing and creating their future.

What Does It Involve?

As a process, strategic planning involves an orderly sequence of activities, each vital to the success of the whole. Strategic planning activities include:

1. Assessing the external environment.
2. Assessing internal capacity.

3. Developing a vision or mission for the future.
4. Developing goals and objectives to reach that future.
5. Implementing the plan.
6. Measuring progress and revising the plan.

The planning process depends on a formal information system. The external and internal assessments provide a reality base on which to build future plans. The vision or mission identifies the organization's purpose and its desired future state. The process of internal assessment and future visioning may uncover, within an organization, differing views of its purpose, its current level of effectiveness, and its potential for the future. Thus, consensus building may be an important element of these phases. Once consensus is reached, the practical steps necessary for reaching that future state over a given period of time—the goals and objectives of the organization—can be identified and actualized in the implementation phase.

Evaluation and revision occur at the end of the planning cycle, but may occur at any stage within the planning process. In ef-

Strategic Planning
—A Stepwise Process—

Once you've made the decision to begin a strategic planning process, you can adapt and adjust the following procedural steps to fit your organization's particular needs. In general, the larger the organization, the more formal the process should be.

1. Assessing the external environment.
2. Assessing internal capacity.
3. Developing a vision or mission for the future.
4. Developing goals and objectives to reach that future.
5. Implementing the plan.
6. Measuring progress and revising the plan.

fect, it is both a final step and an intermediate step or continuous process. Just as sudden changes in the environment—for example, changes in funding, competition, or demographics—may impel changes in the organization's vision, a reconceptualization of the organization's mission may require reexamination of its external environment and internal capacity.

Before You Start

Is strategic planning for you and your organization? Answering the following questions honestly will help you decide.

- What purpose will the strategic plan serve?
- How will it help us?
- Will it be better than the system we use now?
- Are those in leadership positions committed to strategic planning?
- How much will it cost in terms of time and personnel effort?
- Who should be on the planning team?
- Does anyone have experience with strategic planning?
- Do we think we can do it?
- Are we willing to make decisions about our future?

How Is It Done?

The most basic question to ask before starting a strategic planning process is whether to develop a strategic plan. Unless this question is answered honestly in terms of the organization's current status and the attitudes of its members and leadership, the planning process may be doomed before it begins. The question of whether or not to develop a strategic plan

may be based on answers to the following questions:

- *What purpose will the strategic plan serve?*
- *How will it help the organization?*
- *Will it be better than the system we use now?*
- *Are those in leadership positions committed to strategic planning?*
- *How much will it cost in terms of time and personnel effort?*
- *Who should be on the planning team?*
- *Does anyone have experience with strategic planning?*
- *Do we think we can do it?*
- *Are we willing to make decisions about our future?*
- *Will we actually use the plan?*
- *What overriding crises would inhibit our ability to plan?*

If the answers to these questions support the development of a strategic plan, then the process can be initiated.

Strategic planning can be accomplished in as little as four to six two-hour planning sessions.[6] It is important to stay focused on the critical issues. The planning design frequently calls for a small team to direct efforts and develop the written document, but input should come from the entire organization so that each member has a stake in the process and outcome. Team members should work well together, be committed to the process, and be respected by their peers. Whoever leads the planning team should understand planning well enough to help others through the process. If this is a first-time experience for everyone involved, outside expertise may be useful to provide an initial orientation or a jump start. The organization's leader

need not be a formal member of the planning team, but leadership and support for the planning process, including implementation, should be clear from the outset.

Barry offers six tips he gathered from experts across the nation:

- Strategic planning is a way of thinking, an ongoing process. The plan is never perfect or complete.
- Keep the planning simple and manageable.
- Involve the organization's leaders. Don't give away the planning task to support staff or consultants.
- Emphasize creativity, innovation, and imagination rather than blindly following a set of planning steps.
- Don't adopt strategies without careful consideration of how they will be implemented.
- Strategic planning is not an end in itself; it is a tool to help the organization accomplish its mission.

With these tips in mind, a planning team can work through the steps of the planning process, adapting and adjusting the procedure to fit the organization and its members.

Step 1. Assessing the external environment. There are many ways to assess the external environment. Trend analysis is a method of examining changes over time in order to anticipate future conditions and events. Trends within the economic, demographic, social, and political arenas, sometimes referred to as the macro-environment, can also be examined in relation to each other to identify patterns that may have implications for the organization's future. Competition

is a factor to be examined in the external environment. Some members of social service and educational organizations think they are outside of the competitive marketplace, but that is not the case. The competition for limited funding is fairly clear. The *turf* problems frequently encountered between agencies are, at heart, competition for clients.

Environmental Scanning

An organization must be viewed in the context of its environment, both internal and external.

An organization's culture, its belief system, the interaction of its members—these internal factors are directly related to *what* the organization can do and *how* it can be done. An internal assessment provides answers to such questions as: who we are; what we believe; what we can or cannot do; whom we serve; and how we're seen.

Environmental scanning also looks at the community and the organization's place in it. An external assessment seeks answers to such questions as: what is my community like and how is it changing; who else serves my community, and my clients; what needs to be done today, and what will be the needs of tomorrow.

An important factor for community educators is assessing current needs and projecting future needs for the community as a whole and for the various constituencies that may be served by the community education program both now and in the future. As Burbach and Decker point out, assessing the external environment increases the "practitioner's capacity for reaching, identifying, assessing community problems and needs and thereby enables him to develop more responsive programs."[7]

Opinions vary on the optimal order of activities in the planning process. Some experts believe that environmental scanning, or situation analysis, must precede visioning and goal setting, while others feel that an assessment of needs is impossible until goals are set.[8] This publication promotes the view that an assessment of the current status is necessary to formulate a vision for the future. No one organization alone can fulfill all needs within a community. But recognition of myriad needs can help an organization focus its mission on specific needs, defining the areas within which it can function, and establishing its goals and objectives within those parameters.

The methods for gathering information about the external environment include surveys, interviews, the key informant technique, community forums, the charette process, and delphi technique (see Chapter 3 for descriptions).

Typical questions posed during an external assessment include:

- *What is my community like today?*
- *Are the demographics changing? How?*
- *What are the implications of today's trends for the future of my community?*
- *What other agencies currently serve my community?*
- *What services do they provide? To whom?*
- *What needs exist today? What needs are anticipated for tomorrow?*

Step 2. Assessing internal capacity. Every organization is an entity unto itself. If it is an effective organization, its identity embodies an organizational purpose, direction, and unifying force. A problem for some

organizations, especially nonprofits, is that members can become so immersed in the day-to-day functioning of programs that the programs become ends unto themselves, disconnected from the purpose or impact they were designed to achieve. In practice, especially within large or long-existing organizations, members may also have differing views or perspectives and may, in fact, be operating within different paradigms. A factor identified as a source of strength by one may be identified as a weakness by another; one person's critical issue for the future may seem an extraneous matter to another; an organization's stated purpose—what it can and ought to do—may seem clear and viable to some members, and outmoded or irrelevant to others. It is not uncommon for an organization, especially a nonprofit organization, to lose their sense of mission and purpose. Yet, as Pfeiffer and others point out, the values of the organization, and especially of its managers, have a direct impact on what can and cannot be accomplished.[9] These values are the centerpiece of the organization's culture, not only defining what can be done, but also providing the milieu that affects the behavior of individual members. Reaching organizational consensus on identified strengths, weaknesses, purpose, and capacity is one of the greatest challenges of internal analysis.

Questions emerging during an internal assessment include:

- *What purpose do we serve?*
- *What do we believe in?*
- *What are our strengths and weaknesses?*
- *What resources are available to us?*

- *What internal issues must be addressed?*
- *How do we interact with the community?*
- *Whom do we serve?*
- *What needs do we meet?*

Step 3. Developing a vision or mission for the future. Combining current information and future projections about the external environment with a renewed organizational self-concept provides a basis for developing a vision of what the organization will be like in the future. There are several approaches to developing this vision. The desired future state can be expressed philosophically in terms of the belief system capable of moving the organization into the future, and practically in terms of what the organization wishes to accomplish, in the future. For small to medium-sized nonprofit agencies, Barry recommends either a scenario or critical issues approach to future visioning. In the scenario approach, several alternative images of what the organization will be like in the future are developed and rated in terms of their fit with the organization's mission, the community needs, and financial feasibility. These are discussed with members of the organization and the best fit is selected, tested, and refined. The critical issues approach focuses on the challenges facing the organization. Critical issues are

Visioning

Creating the future, rather than being a pawn to evolving events, is the purpose of strategic planning. Imagining, envisioning, creating a mission and future direction for the organization—these identify how the unit, school, or organization will look in the future and provide the framework for today's activities.

identified and prioritized, with possible solutions listed for each. As a "best solution" to each issue is identified, the organization's strategy for the future becomes clear.

Community educators Ellis and others take a different approach, focusing on the community rather than the organization in developing a vision for the future. They define visioning as a "future-focused, proactive process that can empower communities to take charge and creatively shape their own futures, rather than being caught off-guard by future changes."[10] They identify four major tasks to be accomplished during the visioning process: developing shared purposes for the community; detailing a broad-based vision for the future; organizing the vision into themes; and developing a broader vision for each theme. This latter task provides the goals and objectives that then become the guidelines for community education activities.

Future visioning need not be limited to a community or organization as a whole; individual units or programs within an organization can also develop vision statements that are specific to their activities and future direction. Naturally, these must be compatible with and help support the overall organizational mission statement. A consensus-based mission statement can serve an additional, practical purpose in management planning; it can act as a guiding force, or priority standard, for allocating limited resources.[11] Priority items for funding are those that move the organization toward its stated mission.

Developing a sense of the future involves applying the previous two sets of questions to the future:

- *How will our organization look in the future?*
- *What will be our guiding philosophy and mission?*

- *What will our community be like five or ten years from now?*
- *What role will we play?*
- *What needs will exit?*
- *What resources will be available?*
- *Who will we serve?*
- *How will we serve them?*

Step 4. Developing goals and objectives to reach that future. *Who, what, when, where, why, and how* is not only the mantra of journalists, it is also the guideline for developing goals and objectives. And, the future vision of the organization—the *why*—is the guiding force in their development. Specific goals—*what* is to be achieved—are identified to help move the organization from its current state to the desired future state. Goals may be sequential over, for example, a five-year strategic plan, with a completion date specified for each

The Strategic Plan

As a document, the strategic plan states clearly and concisely the findings of the external and internal environmental assessments, defines the consensus-based vision of the organization's future, and specifies those goals and objectives—stated in concrete terms of what is to be done, how, by whom, when—necessary to reach that future. Typical section headings of the strategic plan are:

- Today's Community
- Future Needs
- Organizational Mission and Purpose
- Goals for the Future
- Action Plan to Meet the Future

goal. The objectives may be considered action steps, the accumulation of achievements necessary for attaining each goal. Objectives answer the questions of *who* is responsible, *what* specifically will be done, *how* and *where* it will be done, and *when* it will be completed. The goals and objectives must at all times convey a sense of movement toward the desired end state.

Pfeiffer and others refer to this stage as strategic business modeling.[12] For them, the strategic business model consists of two parts: the strategic profile, which states the business' goals in quantified terms; and clear statements saying how each goal will be achieved. As with goals and objectives, strategic business modeling must be compatible with the organization's vision for the future.

This is the essence of the full strategic plan. As a document, it clearly and concisely outlines the results of the preceding steps. It builds from a statement of the current situation to a description of the desired future situation, with a blueprint of how that future is to be achieved. Section headings may include:

- Today's Community
- Future Needs
- Organizational Mission and Purpose
- Goals for the Future
- Action Plan to Meet the Future
- Assessment and Revision of the Plan.

The strategic plan should be the organization's guiding spirit, providing a common sense of direction and purpose. It need not identify every step in the process; that can be left to the implementation plan. The guideline, however, must be commonly agreed upon and in place before day-to-day activity can have meaningful implementation.

Step 5. Implementing the plan. Implementation shifts the organization's focus from developing the strategic plan to acting upon it. This occurs not only at the organizational level but within each program or unit of the school or organization. The degree to which the plan was developed through honest self-examination, environmental scanning, and stakeholder involvement can determine the ease—or difficulty—the organization will experience in moving toward its envisioned future state. Implementation is, in effect, a reality check on the assumptions and future visioning of the planning process and a test of the organization's capacity, unit by unit, to achieve its stated goals.

Implementation may require greater specificity in the objectives, a detailed description of the steps that must be taken in each unit or program in order to reach the organization's long-term goals. The focus here is on the short-term activities that lead to goal achievement. Implementation can also serve as a strategic management tool, providing both a framework for staff development and a solid basis for evaluating progress.

Implementing the Plan

The entire organization is involved in moving the strategic plan from abstract document to detailed guide for daily activities and decision making.

Implementation itself is an evolving process that is made easier if, from the outset, members of the organization are involved in the strategic planning process and engage in honest external and internal assessments and projections for the future.

Flexibility is a key word in implementation, as it may be necessary to further specify the objective action steps to be taken at the unit level in order to reach the organization's goals.

Step 6. Evaluating progress and revising plans. Although listed as a separate set of activities, evaluation and revision are implied in every step of strategic planning. If continuous evaluation and revision have been an integral part of the strategic plan development process, formal evaluation and revision following implementation are unlikely to involve major changes. The advantages of this are obvious. Each step of the strategic planning process involves a degree of investment by the organization in terms of time, energy, and commitment. The later in the planning process a major revision occurs, the greater retrenchment necessary.

Strategic planning requires a broad base of information. It involves stakeholders in order to develop consensus around a future vision for the organization and the specific steps or activities necessary to reach that future. With faulty information or lack of consensus, there is an insufficient base to support the future vision. Thus, evaluation and revision must begin with

Evaluation and Revision of the Plan

The strategic plan is an integrated whole, with each step influencing and being influenced by each other step in the process. Evaluation, therefore, should be a continuing process throughout the development of the strategic plan. New information or changing events at any point in the process may cause reevaluation of preceding steps and a rethinking of the organization's future.

If evaluation and revision have been an integral part of the development process, the final, formal evaluation step can be viewed as a fine-tuning of the plan to fit the minute realities of daily implementation

the first steps of developing a strategic plan to ensure an adequate base for further development. Additionally, the environment is not static during the development of a strategic plan. Revisions may be necessitated by changing events or changes in personnel, funding patterns, or needs. Many businesses include contingency planning as an ongoing activity throughout the strategic planning process. Strategic planning itself is based on high-probability assumptions, the most likely events.[13] Contingency planning takes into account those opportunities and barriers that *might* arise and challenge the organization's planned future, but probably won't. As a process and as a method of management, therefore, strategic planning requires flexibility—the ability to adapt and revise as conditions change.

NOTES

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2. J. William Pfeiffer, Leonard D. Goodstein, and Timothy M. Nolan. *Applied Strategic Planning: An Overview*. San Diego, CA: University Associates, Inc., 1985, p. 1.
3. Bryan W. Barry. *Strategic Planning Workbook for Nonprofit Organizations*. St. Paul, MN: Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, 1986, p. 10.
4. McCune, pp. 34-35.
5. Barry, p. 13.
6. Ibid., p. 25.
7. Harold J. Burbach, and Larry E. Decker, "A Growing Imperative," in Burbach and Decker, eds. *Planning and Assessment in Community Education*. Midland, MI: Pendell Publishing Company, 1977, p. 20.

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9. Pfeiffer, Goodstein, and Nolan, p. 2.
10. Timothy J. Ellis, Peter J. Murk, and Gordon Y. Ipson, "Community Visioning: Generating Support and Action for Community Education," *Community Education Journal*, XX(3), Spring 1993, p. 18.
11. Pfeiffer, Goodstein, and Nolan, p. 4.
12. Ibid., pp. 4-5.
13. Ibid., p. 6.

CHAPTER 3

ASSESSING THE ENVIRONMENT

Environmental scanning, situation analysis, assessment—these terms describe the internal and external evaluations that are the first two steps in the planning process. Although internal and external analyses are distinct activities, they may be conducted simultaneously, using similar or different methodologies. The important point is that each must be conducted honestly, without prejudicing the results through the use of biased questions, types of data, or methods of data collection and analysis. It is important to note that bias may unintentionally enter the process through omission of, or over reliance on, certain information sources.

The methodology—the *how* information is collected—depends on the needs, abilities, and resources of the organization. A small, collegial school, program, or district can use a very informal, discussion format to assess its internal environment. Large or highly bureaucratic organizations may need to use more formal, structured internal scanning processes. The availability of resources—both personnel time and money—also affect the choice of methods.

These same factors affect the choice of methods for external scanning. If, for example, a district is interested in only a small client population such as preschoolers, assessment can be limited to those children,

Unplanned Bias

A famous example of unintentional bias leading to an inaccurate conclusion is the *Literary Digest* poll predicting the outcome of the 1936 presidential election. The magazine polled more than 10 million people by mail. The more than two million who responded seemed to indicate clearly that Alf Landon would win by a landslide over Franklin Roosevelt.

Two million might seem to be a sufficiently large number upon which to draw conclusions about the election. However, the mailing list was drawn from such sources as telephone books, car registrations, and club rosters. In the middle of the Great Depression, only a small percentage of the population could afford a personal telephone, car, or club membership.

The poll tapped an unrepresentative sample of the population, the minority rich who did not approve of Roosevelt. The majority population—poor, unemployed, underemployed, or insecure in their employment—was systematically under-represented in the survey. Roosevelt won with 61 percent of the vote in November.

their parents, current child care providers, and others who affect or are affected by the preschool population. If, however, the external environment is viewed as the entire community, as it is in community education and increasingly in the K-12 system, care must be taken to include the broad spectrum of groups that comprise the community, covering the entire range of ethnicity, age, socio-economic status, geographic location, employment, special interests, or any other factor of significance to that community.

Some information can be gathered from an examination of changes over time. Trend analysis can help

put current conditions in context and can be used to anticipate future conditions and events. This can be a powerful tool, given the rapid changes now taking place in demographics, family structure, and workforce needs.

Records concerning the economic, demographic, social, and political climate of the broader community should be readily available from local government agencies or historical societies. Basic research of this type can help answer many of the questions that must be addressed in an external assessment; it can show what the community is like today and how it has been changing, both demographically and in economic terms. Clues may be found in today's trends for predicting what the community will be like tomorrow. In

Overview of External Environmental Scanning:
A Four-Step Process Based on Trend Analysis

1. Analyze Trends

Economic Demographic Social Political Environmental

2. Analyze Patterns of Increases or Decreases

National State Regional Local

3. Determine Meaning

Implications for Schools

4. Act

Adapted from McCune, *Strategic Planning in Education, 1986*.

an overview of external environmental scanning (see box), McCune describes a four-step process based on trend analysis: (1) analyze trends; (2) analyze patterns; (3) determine meaning; and (4) act.[1]

Data about discrete, specific client populations, from prenatal to geriatric, can be gathered using similar techniques. How has the birth rate been changing? Have there been changes in the age, ethnicity, or resident areas of those who are having children? What is the employment pattern of those with school-age children? Has the percentage of retirees in the community changed? Public information can also identify competitors, answering questions about other agencies. Do other public or private agencies provide preschool education, after-school child care, enrichment classes, recreational programs, or senior citizen activities? Do the schools and agencies serve the same or different clients? Are they competing for the same funds?

Internally, organizational archives can provide a wide array of information, from changes at the district and local levels in management structure, finances, and perceived mission, to changes in the internal climate within the district and schools and between them and other agencies. These trends can also be examined in terms of how the schools and district relate to each other and to other agencies, and of the impact of each on the other. This historical perspective provides the context and starting point for examining the views of those currently in the district or school as to the purpose, beliefs, strengths and weaknesses, resources, and issues to be faced.

Beyond this library and archive type of research, decisions must be made about the methodology that will be used to gather and analyze non-historical data.

There is no one method that is right or superior for every situation. And even when a particular method seems right for a given situation, limitations in financial and time resources may prohibit its use. In short, the choice of methodologies often involves compromises reflecting the interplay of resources, abilities, and needs.

Any, or any combination, of the following methods may be useful tools for a district or school as it explores itself and its environment. The fact that a method is simple does not make it less effective, nor do elaborate assessment schemes necessarily provide more reliable information. In choosing methodologies, think about the organization, its abilities and needs. Ask yourself: Will we be able to carry it out? Do we need this information? What will we do with it?

If this is a first attempt at strategic planning, try to keep assessments simple. A successful first experience can lead to a continuous planning-assessment-evaluation process. Disappointment in an overly ambitious first attempt may halt the process in its tracks. Remember, planning is a tool to help the district or school function more effectively and reach its potential. An assessment methodology is simply a tool to provide information to the planning process. It is not an end in itself; it should help, not be a burden.

In general, less formal approaches are better suited to smaller organizations and more homogenous environments. The use of more than one method or source will ensure a breadth of viewpoints and increased potential for capturing the entire picture.

The length of the section that follows is not a blanket endorsement of the method; rather, it reflects the fact that the survey is one of the most popular, and

most often abused, methods of gathering information. While community-wide surveys are discussed, the methodology can be adapted for specific client populations or for use as an internal assessment tool by changing the focus of the questions.

Many of the decisions involved in conducting a survey—who to ask, how to ask, how to develop the format, analyze the data, and report the results—are common to most assessment methodologies. They are included here only in the survey section; descriptions of the other methodologies are limited to their unique features.

Surveys

Sometimes referred to as questionnaires or opinionnaires, surveys are one of the most popular methods for gathering information. They have been described as "probably the best known and most widely used research method in the social sciences today."[2] Surveys are also one of the oldest forms of data collection, traceable at least to the Old Testament which refers to a census of the children of Israel.[3]

A survey is an effort to collect information from an individual, being careful not to exert any influence.[4] It is considered a quantitative method in that, regardless of how questions are asked, they are *uniformly* asked of each participant, resulting in standardized information.[5] Although survey research is given a limited review in textbooks of research methods in education, educational research frequently employs survey methodology, either alone or in conjunction with other methods.[6] In fact, a review of three educational jour-

nals—*Research in Higher Education*, *Journal of Higher Education*, and *The School Counselor*—found that from 56 to 84 percent of all empirical articles were based on survey research.[7]

The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* defines a questionnaire as "a printed form containing a set of questions, especially one addressed to a statistically significant number of subjects by way of gathering information, as for a survey." For some, this definition is too limiting. A questionnaire has also been defined with passion as "a totality, a gestalt that is greater than the sum of its individual questions. A questionnaire is organic, with each part vital to every other part, and all parts must be handled simultaneously to create this whole instrument."[8]

Planning, involvement, and testing are all crucial to the survey process. Certain advantages of a survey are readily apparent: it is fast and easy; responses can be gathered from a lot of people. Yet, conducting a *good* survey is not an easy task; witness the many poor surveys, especially survey instruments.

Each step in the survey process involves a decision, with consideration of the advantages and disadvantages of each option. Who will be surveyed? Will the survey be conducted as a self-administered, pencil-and-paper instrument or by interview? (This latter method will be considered separately in the next section.) Will a written survey be handed out, delivered, sent home with school children, conducted in a class or meeting, or mailed? Who will write the questions, and what will they look like? How will the data be analyzed, and what will be done with it? Consciously making these decisions will help improve both the survey process and the quality of the information produced.

Who to survey? Once the purposes of the survey and the types of information needed in the strategic planning process have been decided, the next question is who will you survey. If you wish to better serve a particular client population—for example, people who currently enroll in evening classes—you can conduct the surveys in classes. In this way, you can reach the entire population, determine how effective the programs are, and identify other classes they may wish to take. If, however, you want information on a larger population—for example, all adults who *might* take evening classes—different choices must be made about whom to include and where to conduct the survey.

In a very small community, it might be possible to survey the entire adult population. In most cases, however, only a small percentage, or sample, of the population is surveyed. To draw conclusions about the entire population based on this sample, survey respondents must be representative of the community. The method statisticians use to ensure a representative sample is random sampling or systematic random sampling.

Random sampling means that the inclusion of any one person in the sample is independent of the inclusion of any other person. With a small population, you could write everyone's name on a piece of paper, put the papers into a jar, stir them up, and pull out one slip of paper at a time until you have the desired number of people for your sample. Another way to get a random sample is to use a table of random numbers. Assign numbers to everyone; decide how many are to be included in the sample; decide how you will read the table (up, down, across, every tenth number, whatever); close your eyes and point to any number in the

table. Start with that number and continue to select numbers based on your chosen method for reading the table until you have enough for your sample. A computer program can also be used to randomly choose the numbers for you.

Systematic random samples are a variation of this method. Percentages of sample participants are designed to correspond with population percentages of individuals with a specific characteristic or variable, such as ethnicity, geographic location, age, income level, or other characteristic significant to the school or community. Within each specified variable, survey participants are randomly selected until the number of variable participants meets the predetermined percentage. Most large surveys, such as the Nielsen television ratings and Gallop polls, employ variations of systematic random sampling. Every effort should be made to ensure as representative a sample as possible and to avoid the built-in bias that results from under- or over-representing any group.

How large should the sample be? If there is any rule of thumb, it might be "more than 20," with how much more determined by common sense judgments about the relationship between the sample size and the population size, the importance of the decisions to be made, and the availability of resources. The National School Public Relations Association suggests that specific sample sizes in relation to the total population will assure predictable levels of confidence in the accuracy of the results. For example, a 90 percent confidence level means that if the survey were conducted repeatedly, the same results would be obtained 90 percent of the time (see table). While these sample sizes may be a helpful guide in some circumstances, sample

Brief Guide to Sample Size

Although there is no single answer to how large a survey sample should be, the following is a useful guide when considered in conjunction with needs and resources.

Total Population	Confidence Interval 90%	95%
50	44	43
100	80	73
150	108	97
200	132	115
250	152	130
300	169	143
350	184	153
400	196	162
450	208	170
500	217	176
550	226	182
600	234	187
700	248	195
800	250	202
900	269	208
1000	278	213
1100	285	217
1200	291	221
1300	297	224
1400	302	227
1500	303	229
2000	322	238
3000	341	248
4000	351	254
5000	357	257
10000	370	263
20000	377	267
30000	379	268
50000	381	269
100000	384	271

Adapted from Sample Size Table, *Basic School PR Guide: Survey/Feedback*. Arlington, VA: National School Public Relations Association, 1980, Appendix A, p. 30.

size is not of utmost importance. A sample of 2 million can be insufficient for predictive purposes, while a *representative sample* one-tenth that size can be highly predictive.

How to ask questions? The way in which survey questions are structured is another basic decision that must be made before conducting a survey. Will the questions be open-ended, with the survey respondent providing his or her own answer?

What color is your hair? _____

Or, will they to be closed-ended or forced-choice, with the respondent choosing from a set of alternative responses?

What color is your hair? (check one)

____ *Black*	____ *Red*
____ *Blond*	____ *Gray*
____ *Brown*	____ *White*

Each kind of question has its own advantages. Making a choice between them involves asking yourself some questions: Do I want spontaneity or a common frame of reference? Do I want every possible idea from my respondent or am I after a fast and simple coding process? Do I want the flavor of my respondent's opinions or ease of analysis? Since no one format is inherently better than another, the question of structure must be answered in the context of what you are attempting to find out.

The debate about the relative merits of open- and closed-ended questions is old and ongoing. Discussing

the advantages of making responders choose, one authority commented in 1988: "If you don't think of the possible responses before the survey, you'll be in serious trouble. ... [I]f you let people supply their own alternatives, you'll probably end up with as many different answers as there were people. By forcing people to choose among specific alternatives ... you can get data that are easier to analyze."[9] Today, the closed-ended format is the mainstay of survey research.

What Type of Question?

Open-Ended Question

A question the respondent answers using his or her own words. A line or blank space is provided for the response. This format is also known as "free-response" or "supply."

Closed-Ended Question

A question to which the respondent chooses a response from a list of options. The choice may be indicated by a checkmark, an "X," or a circle. This format is also known as "forced-choice," "check," or "select."

Partially Closed-Ended with "Other" Option

A closed-ended question with an open-ended response alternative. If this choice is selected, the respondent is asked to specify his or her free choice of a response. This format is also known as "mixed.".

There may, however, be subtle differences in responses to the different formats. A difference in the *tone* of the responses was found in a series of surveys of faculty and students; respondents were more likely to respond negatively to open-ended questions and positively to closed-ended questions.[10] Open-ended questions also seem to produce more accurate answers to quantitative behavioral questions such as, How

Open-Ended Question Format

Advantages

- Can be used when all of the possible response categories are not known, or to identify appropriate response categories.
- Allows respondent to clarify and answer in detail.
- Can be used when there are too many potential response categories to list.
- Preferable for complex issues that cannot be condensed into a few small categories.
- Allows more opportunity for creativity or self-expression.

Disadvantages

- May lead to collection of worthless and irrelevant information.
- Data often not standardized from person to person, making analysis difficult.
- Coding often difficult and subjective, leading to low inter-coder reliability.
- Requires superior writing skills and verbal abilities of respondent.
- Questions may be too general for respondent to understand, thus requiring follow-up question; therefore inappropriate for self-administered questionnaires.
- Requires more time of the respondent; may engender low response rate.
- Requires more paper; may make questionnaire look long, thus discouraging respondents.

Closed-Ended Question Format

Advantages

- Answers are standardized; can be compared from person to person.
- Answers are easier to code and analyze.
- Respondent is often clearer about meaning of the question.
- Answers are relatively complete with a minimum of irrelevant responses.
- Respondents are more likely to answer sensitive questions.
- Often easier for respondent, i.e., can choose rather than formulate answer.

Disadvantages

- Respondent can guess or answer randomly.
- Respondent may feel frustrated, e.g., cannot clarify an answer or preferred answer is not offered.
- May be too many response categories to include on the form.
- Answers may be subject to differences in interpretation.
- Variations in answers may be artificially eliminated.
- Increased likelihood of a clerical error, e.g., misnumbering response.

Adapted from Baily, *Methods of Social Research* (2nd ed.), 1982.

much do your smoke? A possible explanation for this difference is that precoded categories provide clues as to what is normal in the population, and, if actual behavior is at the high or low extreme, the respondent tends to move toward the center and either under- or over-report the actual behavior.[11]

Devising a partially closed question by adding "other, please specify" as a response choice to a closed-ended item is also open to debate. Some researchers feel that the "other" category makes the item applicable to all respondents, allows the discovery of additional categories, and is of particular use in qualifying results and constructing similar items in the future.[12] Others feel that it rarely provides sufficient data for statistical purposes but can provide useful information, especially if there is a large number of volunteered responses.[13] Still others believe that the provision of closed alternatives discourages spontaneous responses that do not fit the listed options.[14] The majority of respondents would presumably check a choice option when reminded, even if they would not think of it or write it down as an "other."[15]

A survey may contain a mix of two or three types of questions. Appropriateness to the situation is the deciding factor. When more than one question format is used, open-ended questions are generally included near the end.

Comparing question type. One of the largest systematic efforts to compare open-ended and closed-ended questions within the framework of a standard large-scale attitude survey is presented by Schuman and Presser. *Questions and Answers in Attitude Surveys* reports on a series of five studies comparing open-ended and closed-ended question formats, holding all

other variables constant. Their first study focused on a question identifying the most important problem facing the country, an item regularly posed as an open-ended question. The choice options for the closed-ended question were developed from the results of previous open-ended questions. The comparable forms were tested during the 1976 Detroit Area Study. Of the eight response categories common to both forms, only three received appreciable proportions of responses on the open-ended form. The authors felt that the difference in response patterns was a result of having a common frame of reference on the closed-ended form; they theorized that some respondents to the open-ended form might have viewed some issues as local, rather than national, problems.

A study the following year indicated that the changing environment affected responses to the open-ended form, but not to the closed-ended form. At a time of food and energy shortages resulting from the coldest winter in recent history, almost a quarter of those responding to the open-ended form identified food and energy as a major concern. The closed-ended format survey did not include this response option, but did include an "other" category. Only one out of 5,902 respondents mentioned the energy crisis.

From this set of studies and others, Schuman and Presser drew several conclusions. First, open-ended questions are essential for constructing appropriate alternatives and for obtaining the frame of reference of respondents. They should be used when there is such a diversity of responses that it is impossible to construct an adequate closed-ended question. They are also useful for follow-up and in cases of rapidly changing events. Except in these special circumstances, the

authors recommend conducting an open-ended pilot study to establish response parameters, then relying exclusively on closed-ended items for the actual survey.

Making a choice. In 1991, the Mid-Atlantic Center for Community Education at the University of Virginia conducted a national assessment to identify the training and material needs in community education.[16] The survey results would be a guide to enhancing community education development over the following five years. The decision to use many open-ended questions in addition to a few scaled items was based on several factors: (1) since community education development varies significantly among the states, there might be widely different needs among the states; (2) the anticipated responses were largely unknown, as there was little information upon which to base them; and (3) it was important to capture the *flavor* of the moment because major restructuring and financing changes were taking place in some state educational systems.

Coding and analyzing open-ended questions is a lengthy and labor intensive process. Although a decision was made that the advantages of open-ended questions outweighed the disadvantages, the work associated with the data analysis was staggering. While the survey contained only 28 questions, the multiple responses possible for many questions yielded 118 possible variables. The variety of responses was so great that some questions had as many as 240 different answers. This survey was conducted at a research-oriented university. Most programs and many school districts would not have the time and resources necessary to analyze such masses of data.

After the Mid-Atlantic Center had completed the national survey, it moved to help state associations and state departments of education conduct their own state-level surveys. The intent was to develop individualized questionnaires that would provide comprehensive information and which could be easily analyzed. Weighing the advantages and disadvantages of open-ended versus closed-ended questions, the choice of closed-ended questions was made both because of restraints on data analysis, and because the information gathered by the national survey made it possible to develop a useful closed-ended instrument.

There was concern that the quality, nature, or substance of responses might be different, depending on the question format. Would the responses to a question such as, What are the three most important topics/issues that community education training should be addressing? be the same or different depending on whether the form contained a blank space for answers or provided a list of options to be checked? Research in this area is both limited and conflicting, but there is some evidence that the two formats may elicit very different responses.[17]

The Center focused on this area of concern in Florida in 1992 during its first state-level needs assessment, conducted in cooperation with the Stewart Mott Davis Center for Community Education at the University of Florida.[18] More than 360 community educators were identified and randomly assigned to receive either a closed-ended or open-ended survey; the survey forms differed only in the response format. For exploratory purposes, a few community educators were sent partially closed-ended forms containing the "Other, please specify" response option.

As in other studies, the results were mixed. While on some items there was a large degree of similarity in the response patterns of respondents in the two groups, on others there was little similarity. In most cases, the differences appeared to stem from the greater diversity of responses on the open-ended form; many responses were given by only one or two respondents. In only one area was there a striking, and statistically significant, difference between formats: response rates were higher for the closed-ended format survey.

Developing the form. "Relevance" is the key word in developing a survey instrument: the study goals must be relevant; the questions must be relevant to the goals; and the questions must be relevant to the respondent. It must be remembered that, in most cases, survey respondents are working for free and that "most people are willing to aid in projects they feel to be worthwhile."[19]

Developing a survey form is an iterative process. Working from an itemization of the information needed, questions are written to elicit that information. For specific, factual information, such as whether someone has attended a PTA meeting within a given time period, a fairly straightforward question can be asked:

How many PTA meetings did you attend during the 1994-95 school year? *0 1 2 3 4*

To gather less tangible informatio , such as an estimate of the quality of a community's schools, several questions may be necessary in order to form a composite picture—ratings of teaching staff, support staff, ad-

Developing the Form

Relevance is the key word in developing a survey instrument: the study goals must be relevant; the questions must be relevant to the goals; and the questions must be relevant to the respondent.

Write with your respondent in mind. Questions should be clear and appropriate in language and tone to the community.

Make the form look easy to respond to by providing enough open space.

Keep it short. Instead of four or more pages, consider several shorter surveys.

If using open-ended questions, allow enough space for answers.

If using closed-ended questions, develop choice options through previous information, brainstorming, and sampling with open-ended questions.

Test it out. Give the survey to a small sample. Ask for feedback. Did the survey provide the anticipated information? Was it easy to fill out? What can be left out? What needs to be added?

Revise and test again. Work out the bugs before you invest in a full survey.

ministration, curriculum, materials, facilities, etc. However factual or nebulous an answer, each question should be calculated to provide a piece of *useful* information.

Questions should be simple and the directions clear. The more complicated the directions, the less likely people are to respond, or to respond in the manner you seek. If you want several pieces of information, ask several questions. For example, instead of asking parents to check their top four priorities for school improvement and then circle their single highest priority, ask two distinct questions: What is the single most important priori-

ty for school improvement? (check one) What additional priority areas should be addressed? (Check Three.)

Questions should be designed with the respondent in mind. They should be relevant, and appropriate in language and tone to the population being surveyed. Will the survey be conducted in English, or would another language better suit the community? Words and phrasing must be tailored to the general educational level of respondents. Questions written for a community in which more than 90 percent of adults are college graduates may be worded very differently from those written for a community in which fewer than half the adults hold a high school diploma.

People responding to the survey are helping you; be considerate of them. Make the form attractive. People are more likely to respond to a clean-looking questionnaire with open space than to a crowded piece of paper. The survey form should look easy to answer. If open-ended questions are asked, provide enough space for answers. For closed-ended items, be clear about how and where to mark the chosen response.

The length of the survey has an effect on the size of the response. While the general rule of thumb is, "the fewer the pages, the higher the percentage of return,"[20] there also appears to be a nonlinear relationship between survey length and response rate. People are more likely to respond to a three page questionnaire than to either a one- or five-page form.[21] Perhaps a one-page survey does not seem important enough to respond to, while a five-page form seems too time-consuming. If there is a great deal of information to be gathered, it may be more effective to conduct several shorter surveys.

Whether using open- or closed-ended questions, the question must be clear and unambiguous and lead the respondent to provide the kind of information you are seeking. Responses to the open-ended question, How much did you donate to charity last year? might include *10 percent of my salary, about $1,200, $423.64, a lot of used clothes,* or *two hours a week.* To identify monetary donations, the question could be rephrased, *How much money did you donate to charities, including churches and religious charities, during 1994 (round off to the nearest $100)?*

A respondent may not read the question in the way intended by the writer, or may see it as two or more distinct questions: Do you read to your child every day at bedtime? Possible answers might include: Yes, I read to my six-year-old every day. No, I don't read at bedtime. Yes, I read to my six-year-old but not to my 17-year old.

Questions must be tested. Test with a small group of peers and a small sample from the survey population. Solicit comments on how to make the questions clearer. Revise and test again. Before going to the entire sample or population, be sure the information the survey will give you is what you want. Several rounds of testing and revising can dramatically improve both the quantity and the quality of responses.

Testing and revising are especially important in developing responses to closed-ended questions. The differences between response options should be absolutely clear. In his classic work on surveys, Babbie identified two essential characteristics of closed-ended questions: the response categories should always be both exhaustive and exclusive.[22] Fairly obvious problems can arise from failing to meet these criteria.

At what age did you have measles? (circle one)
0 1-3 3-5 6-8 9-11

If at age three, do I circle *1-3* or *3-5*? If at age 12, do I leave it blank or circle the closest answer? Does *0* mean under age one or never?

While the options should include all potential responses, the list should not be oppressively long. If a list is so long that it discourages reading through to find a response, that question is a candidate for an open-ended format. Again, common sense is the best guide.

Several methods can be used to develop choice options. If it is a repeat survey, begin with the responses from any previous survey. Brainstorming with a small group can provide additional options. To help assure currency and relevance, the question can be given to a small sample as an open-ended item and their responses used to develop response options. With closed-ended questions, the testing-revising process can help focus, refine, and streamline the choice options and increase the effectiveness of the survey.

Distribution. The way a questionnaire is distributed is closely related to who is being asked. In a survey of parents of 2nd graders, it is appropriate and effective to send the form home in a child's backpack. The same method may be less effective with parents of 11th graders. To survey adults currently enrolled in evening classes, questionnaires could be distributed in classrooms. To sample the broader community, forms could be personally delivered, left in doorways, or mailed. The first method is the most costly and time consuming, as it requires individual contact with each

person being surveyed, but it can produce high response rates, as each individual surveyed is made to feel that his or her opinion is important. Leaving questionnaires in doorways can lead to the problems of not knowing who actually received it.

Mail surveys. Mail surveys are relatively inexpensive, easy to organize, and can assure respondents' anonymity. Other advantages to a mail survey include the ease of wide distribution, a better chance of obtaining truthful and thoughtful replies, and the ability to centralize control of the process.

In planning a mail survey, allow at least two months from the first mailing until all the data have been collected. The format, layout, and general attractiveness of the survey can have a significant impact on the number of responses. A typical mail survey will include a cover letter, the survey form, and a stamped, pre-addressed return envelope. Some researchers even include a monetary reward to encourage response.

The cover letter itself is an important part of a mail survey. It should explain the purpose of the survey and how the information will be used. It can encourage a response by emphasizing the importance of the respondent's opinions. The letter should emphasize the legitimacy of the information gathered and should estimate how long it will take to complete the form and a date by which it should be returned.

There are two primary problems associated with mail surveys: the difficulty of obtaining a current and complete mailing list and low response rates. Still, the economies associated with mail surveys lead researchers to their use, and various techniques have been developed to help overcome the response rate issue.

Who answers? When people are concerned about an issue and feel that their opinion is important and will have an impact, they are likely to respond. One theory states that respondents look for "maximal effort" on the part of researchers and "minimal effort" on their own part.[23] Low response rates, especially to mail surveys, greatly concern some researchers, since the opinions of those who respond may be different from those who do not. However, several studies have found that within homogeneous populations—homogeneous in terms of shared professional interests, role characteristics, beliefs, or attitudes—the mail response patterns were similar to information gathered in follow-up procedures with non-respondents.[24] Regardless of homogeneity, there are various techniques in terms of the survey process itself that can be used to encourage responses.

Publicity can prepare the community for the survey and generate interest in it. Greater awareness and interest can lead to a better response rate and, therefore, to more representative data. Publicity should focus on the survey's purpose, method, and timeline, not on the specific questions to be asked. Publicity must be carefully carried out to avoid polarizing public opinion or biasing the results of the survey.[25]

Timing also affects response rates. Adams and Gale cite it as a limitation to their study of questionnaire length.[26] Denton and others cite timing as a contributing factor in a lower than anticipated response rate to an April-May survey and recommend that mail surveys of teachers be conducted during the middle of an academic year.[27] In the Austin, Texas, Independent School District, Jackson and Schuyler experienced their lowest return rate in seven years when question-

naires were mailed to graduates in April instead of February.[28]

The type of question format—open-ended or closed-ended—affects response rates, with closed-ended questions eliciting greater response. It simply takes more time and effort to respond to open-ended questions. In a series of seven annual teacher surveys using computer printed questionnaires, half of the respondents did not answer the open-ended items.[29] In a study of magazine readership with equivalent open- and closed-ended question survey forms, 60 percent responded to the closed-ended survey, and only 50 percent to the open-ended form.[30] The 1992 Florida community education survey showed a 20 percent higher rate of return from those who received the closed-ended form.

What response rate makes a survey reliable or its results generalizable? The answer is open to debate. Some researchers make do with returns as low as 50 to 60 percent.[31] Others view a 50 percent response rate as unreliable unless follow-up studies show that information gathered from non-respondents is similar to that of respondents.[32] Most researchers accept Babbie's dictum that a response rate of 50 percent is adequate for analysis and reporting, 60 percent is good, and 70 percent or higher is very good.[33] The decision about what constitutes an acceptable response rate must be made within the context of the survey, its goals, and the costs and importance of the decisions to be made.

Increasing response rates in mail surveys. Too often, response rates are not considered until a survey is underway and it is discovered that the initial response is inadequate. The time to think about response rates is at the beginning of the survey process.

In general, people who are going to respond to a

mail survey do so quite quickly. Ninety percent of all returns will come within two weeks of the mailing, with returns diminishing thereafter.[34] Because of this pattern, there should be a follow-up mailing two or three weeks after the initial request. The follow-up can be conducted in a variety of ways. A reminder card can be mailed to all survey recipients or just to non-respondents. A follow-up letter can be sent emphasizing the importance of the survey. At least one follow-up mailing identical to the first, including the cover letter, survey form, and return envelope, is highly effective. There are increasingly fewer responses to a third or more request.[35]

A holistic, process-based approach to conducting surveys is Dillman's Total Design Method (TDM).[36] TDM is based on social exchange theory, which states that people's actions are motivated by the return they expect, and usually receive, from other people. In other words, people are more likely to act if they expect the rewards to exceed the expected costs. TDM identifies three major ways to maximize benefits and minimize costs for respondents: reward the respondent; reduce the costs to the respondent; and establish trust.

A reward may be a small monetary award; showing a regard for the respondent; giving verbal appreciation; using a consultative approach; or making the questionnaire interesting. In the cover letter mailed with the survey, respondents should be made to feel appreciated as individuals whose opinions are important. The costs to a respondent are not purely monetary; time, energy, and risk of embarrassment are also costs. Therefore, a survey form should look easy to complete in terms of both physical and mental effort; any chance of embarrassment or implication of subor-

dination should be eliminated; and direct monetary costs to the respondent should be eliminated through such means as providing a stamped, pre-addressed return envelope. Finally, trust can be established through mention of an individual or organization respected by the respondent. A monetary reward or small token of appreciation also demonstrates the researcher's trust in the respondent.

These TDM procedures are not difficult to follow, but it is rare that they are fully employed. Their effectiveness has been demonstrated. A review of three research studies that followed TDM procedures to varying degrees, indicated a positive relationship between response rate and use of TDM. The study that followed the fewest TDM recommendations had a response rate of 62 percent while the one that most closely followed the procedures had a 91 percent response rate.[37]

The cover letter that accompanied the 1992 Florida state community education survey described above illustrates use of several key TDM recommendations. The letter expresses appreciation of and respect for the respondent as a colleague; the purpose of the survey is identified as important; and input from the respondent is described as vital. The specific use of the information to be gathered is identified, and the impact it will have on the respondents is implied. Costs to the respondent are minimized. The amount of time required to complete the form is stated, and a stamped, pre-addressed return envelope is included. As an immediate reward, respondents are promised a copy of the survey report. A long-term, more important reward is implied: personal influence on training and material development and on the future direction of community education in the state.

Sample Cover Letter

The cover letter accompanying the 1992 Florida community education survey combines several elements that may help increase the survey response rate.

Date

Dear Florida Community Educator:

The Mid-Atlantic Center for Community Education at the University of Virginia and the Stewart Mott Davis Center for Community Education at the University of Florida have initiated collateral 5-year National State Community Education Capacity Building projects, supported by the C. S. Mott Foundation. In 1991, the Mid-Atlantic Center conducted a national assessment on publications, training, and state capacity building needs. That information is currently serving as the guideline for enhancing Community Education development nationally.

This year, the projects are focusing on the identification of state-level capacity building needs. As part of that effort, the Mid-Atlantic Center, in cooperation with the Stewart Mott Davis Center, is conducting a series of needs assessments to identify the publications, training, and capacity building needs specific to an individual state.

A sample of Florida Community Education project personnel who receive state Community Education funding are being asked to provide vital input to the needs assessment process. The population of Florida Community Educators being sampled is small, so we need your response. It will take approximately 15 minutes to complete the survey. The final report will summarize group responses: **no individual names will be identified or disseminated**. All individuals responding to this request will receive a copy of the 1992 Florida Needs Assessment Report.

We look forward to receiving your response and ask that you return the survey by **May 25, 1992**.

Sincerely,

Signature, title Signature, title

Analyzing the data. Survey results must be transformed into usable information. The details of this process should be outlined during construction of the survey. The formatting of questions, coding of responses, and analysis of data are interrelated activities. In testing the survey form, the coding and analysis process must also be tested.

Coding is the assignment of a value to each possible response. In a closed-ended question, the number one can be assigned to the response listed first, two to the response listed second, etc., for as many responses as there are. A coding sheet is prepared listing each question with the code value for each possible answer.

For an open-ended question, the coding is more complicated and more time-consuming. A preliminary coding sheet of possible responses can be developed from responses that emerged during the test runs. As surveys are coded, new responses that cannot be subsumed into the preliminary list are assigned values and added to the coding sheet. The length of the final coding sheet will be determined by the number of possible responses. When there is a great deal of agreement around a few response options, the coding sheet may be quite short. When there has been little discussion of an item or the question is so broad that there are many possible answers, the length of the coding sheet can be staggering. With an unwieldy list, the challenge is to collapse categories to make the data manageable without oversimplifying it to the point of meaninglessness. Data reduction is one of the primary difficulties in analyzing the responses to open-ended questions.

For coding closed-ended questions, training is a straightforward process. A coding sheet lists a value

for each possible response; coders are taught where and how to record the responses. Codes may be written directly on the survey form or entered on a separate data sheet. Coding must be done carefully because the process of assigning, writing, and copying numbers can easily introduce errors.

Codes for open-ended questions can also be recorded on the survey form or a data sheet, but the training for coding these responses is more complex. All coders must agree on the interpretation of the coded responses; there must be a predetermined method for deciding when a response can be categorized as a new response and provided a separate value. In coder training, coders should practice coding and identifying new responses. The way in which different coders evaluate the surveys can be compared to determine the level of agreement. The degree of inter-coder reliability—how similar coders are to each other in assigning values—will greatly affect the reliability of the survey results.

Analysis of survey responses can be as simple as running a numerical tally for each possible response option. This is a tedious technique; errors may occur due to boredom, so it is a good idea to have two people run separate tallies and compare the results. If the school, district, or community has appropriate computer facilities and personnel, data can be entered on computer disk and analyzed using a commercial data analysis program, such as Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results can be reported in a variety of ways. Nominative data, that which describes discrete categories such as sex, political affiliation, and place of residence, is reported in totals and percentages. Opinion surveys usually ask for categorical data: What is the most im-

portant issue? For which candidate will you vote? Should the schools implement site-based management? While a mode, or most common response, can be reported, this type of data cannot be averaged. For example, in looking at political affiliation, if being a Democrat is coded one, Republican two, and Independent three, we can determine the number of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents responding to the survey, and the percentage of survey respondents in each category; an average political affiliation of 1.93, however, has no meaning.

Scaled items—items on which a respondent is asked to indicate a degree of agreement—can also be reported by providing totals and percentages and by reporting a mode (most common response) and median (the point at which half the responses are above and half below). Scaled items are treated as interval data, that is, as having equal distances between possible responses. An average response to a scaled item has meaning. On a five-point Likert scale ranging, for example, from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), an average, or mean, of 4.25 shows a high level of agreement on that item. Ratio data—interval data with a recognized zero point such as age or annual income—can also be described by reporting totals, percentages, mode, median, and mean.

Once the data for each question has been analyzed, comparisons can be made. Results can be compared with previous surveys to determine changes or trends over time. Responses to a single question in one part of town can be compared to responses in another area. Is the response pattern about a question of school quality the same in a neighborhood of single family residences with a high proportion of children as it is in a neigh-

borhood containing a senior citizen apartment complex? Responses to one question can also be related to responses to another question. Are respondents who give schools a high rating, more likely to support bond issues than those who rate schools as functioning poorly?

Further comparisons can be made using statistical methods, the services of school, district, or community statisticians, or, if funds are available, an outside consultant. More advanced statistical analysis can calculate correlations between two or more variables, combine responses to a set of questions and correlate them with another set of questions, or determine whether differences between two or more groups is statistically significant.

The purpose of the survey and analysis of its results is to provide information from which to draw conclusions and develop a plan of action, but the researcher must be careful, in drawing those conclusions. Apparent differences may not be statistically significant and, therefore, may be an inadequate base upon which to draw conclusions. Although there may appear to be differences, for example, in the response patterns of different demographic groups—different in terms of resident area, having school-age children, educational level, annual income, etc.—these differences may be due to chance, a result of the vagaries of random sampling. If so, any conclusions based on apparent differences could be erroneous.

Reporting

Having gone through the time, effort, and expense of conducting a survey and analyzing the data, the fi-

nal step in the process is reporting the results. To whom, how, and when they are reported are decisions to be made at the beginning of the survey process. In general, results should be reported at least to decisions makers, those expected to implement action as a result of the survey, and those who participated in the survey. Unfortunately, the latter group is frequently overlooked. Just as publicity can encourage participation in a survey, reporting results can provide positive feedback to participants and encourage others to cooperate in the future. Several versions of the survey report may be prepared to facilitate the sharing of information. The reporting process begins by developing as complete a report as possible.

If a researcher or statistician develops the report, he or she will include appendices outlining the statistical procedures used. If such expertise is not available or affordable, the report may be less sophisticated but should be just as complete. The Public Management Institute has developed an outline (see box) for preparing survey reports.[38] It is a useful guide for transforming data and analysis into a workable planning tool.

The Executive Summary, which provides a brief synopsis of the report's contents, may appear at the beginning or end of the report. Providing it at the beginning is a common technique for assuring that it has as many readers as possible..

The full survey report is often used by staff as a resource or as reference material for distribution to advisory and governing bodies. Shorter, less formal versions of the survey report are typically the working papers for planning. Shorter reports may also be more appropriate for a variety of audiences, as few have the training or desire to read statistics-laden reports. The

Reporting Survey Results

The following outline may be helpful in organizing survey results to facilitate their use in the planning process.

1. **Title Page**: Title, sponsoring organization, place and date of publication, name of person or organization to whom the report is addressed.
2. **Table of Contents**: Outline of topics by headings and subheadings, with page numbers.
3. **List of Illustrations, Tables, and Charts**: List of all charts, etc., numbered consecutively, with page numbers. List statistical tables separately.
4. **Introduction or Foreword**: Why the survey was conducted, a problem statement. If using a survey committee, how it was organized and a list of members, including affiliations.
5. **Background**: Purpose, goals, and objectives of the study. Description of sampling method and sample size. Description of survey method and results, including nonresponses, time span, and dates.
6. **Summary**: Abstract of important points and recommendations.
7. **Text or Body of Report**: Verbal explanation of questionnaire responses and of what is shown in tables, charts, and graphs. Overall picture revealed by study. Significant comparisons, trends, and exceptions to general situation. Conclusions based on survey findings. Recommendations, both short- and long-term.
8. **Appendix**: Copy of questionnaire, including cover letter. Statistical data, unsummarized tabular material. If appropriate, bibliography, glossary of terms, and letter of authorization or endorsement.

Adapted from the Public Management Institute's *Needs Assessment Handbook*, 229-230.

type of report prepared depends on the audience. To share information with the entire community, giving a summary of the survey findings to local newspapers may be both efficient and effective.

Interviews

A structured interview, yielding the same kinds of information from a variety of people, is often employed in internal and external assessments. Interviews may be conducted face-to-face or by telephone. Many of the decisions, recommendations, and cautions outlined in the Survey section apply to interviews, with some additional, unique requirements.

As in the case of written surveys, interviews can ask open- or closed-ended questions. Interviews minimize ambiguity, because both the respondent and the interviewer may ask for clarification. This is especially helpful with open-ended questions, as the interviewer can provide a frame of reference. Caution should be taken, however, not to lead the respondent to a specific answer; simply providing an example can change a respondent's thinking, limit the response possibilities, and taint the data. Interviews provide an opportunity to gather the *flavor* of responses, and quotes from the interview can be a powerful addition to the text of a final report.

Another advantage of interviews is that they permit an easy layering of questions, a difficult procedure in a paper-and-pencil format. An interviewer can select a set of follow-up questions depending on how a person answers a particular question. For example, the set of follow-up questions asked respondents who describe their lifestyle as "very active" is likely to be

Interviews

As an assessment technique, interviews can be viewed as a structured, one-on-one, oral survey. They can be conducted either face-to-face or by telephone. They are a labor-intensive procedure and can be expensive and time consuming, involving phone banks or transportation, training for interviewers, and a great deal of time for the interview.

Interviewers play a vital role in the procedure, and their training is of utmost importance. Interaction between an interviewer and a respondent should not change or color any response. The greater the consistency between interviewers and across interviewer-respondent interactions, the greater the reliability of the data. Therefore, interviewer training should include how to ask the questions, how to record the answers, and how to respond to respondent inquiries. A description of the training should be included in the final report.

different from that asked of self-described "sedentary" respondents.

Interviews are labor-intensive and, therefore, expensive. Phone banks or transportation, training for interviewers, the time required for each interview and for return calls or visits to potential respondents who were not available at the first attempt to contact—all these add to the monetary cost.

Training of the interviewers is of the utmost importance. The interviewer must explain the purpose of the survey and encourage responses. To assure that the same information is gathered from all respondents, questions must be asked in exactly the same way. Interviewers must be trained in how to ask the questions, how to record the answers, and how to respond to respondent inquiries. Practice sessions and role

playing will familiarize interviewers with the content and pacing of questions and prepare them for many of the situations that may arise. The interviewer must be consistent from respondent to respondent, and there must be consistency among interviewers. The interviewer-respondent interaction should not change or color any response. The greater the consistency among interviewers and across interviewer-respondent interactions, the more reliable the data will be. The final report for an interview survey should include a description of the training received by interviewers, including who trained them.

Although time-consuming and expensive, interviews may increase the response rate; most people find it easier to toss a form away than to close a door in someone's face. Respondents recognize the cost of conducting interviews, and that factor may increase their sense of importance and encourage them to take the time to answer the interview questions. Conversely, with very sensitive material, respondents may hesitate to answer questions or may moderate their responses to protect their self-image or the interviewer's image of them.

The advantages of possibly increased response rates, greater depth of information, and greater flexibility in question layout must be weighed against increased costs, the need for well-trained interviewers, and the possibility of getting less reliable information.

Key Informant Technique

This technique relies on "key informants," individuals who are identified as knowing the needs,

strengths, weaknesses, and climate of the community. Information about the community, its concerns and opinions, can be collected from key informants in interviews, questionnaires, or group discussions and meetings, and information about the school or organization can be disseminated into the community through key informants. This is an especially useful way of explaining and publicizing the school's or the organization's function, goals, and needs. Its effectiveness is directly determined by the quality of the informants and the degree to which they represent the community. With good and representative informants, the technique has obvious strengths: it is simple and inexpensive, encourages discussion, and involves community members in dialogue with the school or organization.

Key informants can be found throughout the community. Elected officials and leaders of other agencies are potential informants. Longtime members of the community, parents active in the schools, the informal leadership network of those who are trusted in the community—all are potential key informants.

Key Informant Technique

As its name indicates, this technique relies on individuals who are identified as "knowing" the needs, strengths, weaknesses, and climate of the community. Elected officials, agency leaders; longtime members of the community, parents active in schools, the informal leadership network of those who are trusted within the community—all provide potential sources for key informants.

The process involves a two-way information flow between the community and the school or organization with the key informant acting as a communication's facilitator or liaison.

The State of Hawaii used this technique successfully as it began developing its Parent-Community Networking Centers in 1986.[39] Hawaii is unique in that it is a single unified school system governed by the State Board of Education and funded through state general revenues. Despite this centralization of administration and financing, diversity, local control, and respect for community are hallmarks of the educational system. Connection, meaning, empowerment, and esteem are recognized as signs of community, and community is recognized as the prime method for counteracting alienation in today's society.

The Parent-Community Networking Centers are designed to nurture a sense of community among parents, faculty, and other community members. Established at the request of individual schools, each center is staffed by a part-time parent facilitator who acts as liaison between the school, principal, teachers, and students and families. The planned effect of this effort is increased student achievement and self-esteem.

The parent facilitators are key to the program's success. In choosing facilitators, educators looked to key informants in the community either to act as or to recommend facilitators. Qualifications for the position are "people" skills: an open attitude, willingness to learn, and the capacity to care for and relate to others. Facilitators act as key informants for the school, inviting questions from the community and creating partnerships with community agencies.

The centers look to their communities for direction. Thus, the program of activities for each center is unique to its setting. The common thread is training in the *ways of community*, a four-step process that includes: (1) providing people with information and op-

tions; (2) inviting them to find and express meaning; (3) building personal resource networks; and (4) developing self/group esteem and a sense of community. The success of the program is indicated by the fact that the number of centers grew from six to 136 in its first three years of operation.

Community Forums

Community forums are a grassroots approach to gathering community input.[40] Their historic roots are in New England's town meetings, at which all community members are free to express their opinions and attitudes. Today, forums may be held at various locations throughout the community to provide access to a broad spectrum of community members. Topics may range from a general discussion of the state of the community, to a focused exploration of a specific issue.

A natural energy emerges from community forums as individual after individual expresses opinions and emotions. A pitfall may be that false expectations are created, and disappointment or disillusionment may emerge from a limited outcome. Care must be taken to moderate expectations and help community members realize that change, results, or solutions may be slow in coming.

Community forums can be set up quickly and at little cost. Schools are a natural site for community forums. Located throughout the community, their locations are well known and they usually have at least one large room that can be used for meetings. In larger communities, the logistics of conducting the number of forums necessary to provide easy access for all community members are obviously more difficult.

A positive feature of community forums is that they are open to all community members and provide an opportunity for the broadest spectrum of opinions to emerge. This positive feature is also one of its drawbacks: attendance is a self-selecting process, and it cannot be assumed that those who attend are a representative sample of the community. In fact, certain segments of the population, the elderly and homebound, for example, may be totally excluded from the forums. Alternatively, forums may serve to identify pro-active community members.[11] On controversial issues—closing a neighborhood school for example—only those strongly opposed or strongly in favor may at-

Community Forums

A grassroots approach to gathering community input, community forums are the modern expression of New England open town meetings at which all community members are free to express their opinions and attitudes. Topics may range from a general discussion of the state of the community to a focused exploration of a specific issue.

Their advantage is the ease, speed, and minimal costs of setting up and holding meetings. Information, especially the *flavor* of public opinion, can be gathered in a timely manner on emerging issues.

The potentially negative aspects of the process are outgrowths of its strengths. The forums are open for *all* community members, however, not all segments of the population may participate. On volatile issues, there is a danger of opposing attitudes becoming entrenched. Another danger is that heightened expectations resulting from the forums may lead to disappointment or disillusionment if results are delayed.

tend. In that case, instead of serving as a helpful information-gathering methodology, forums may serve to entrench opposing attitudes.

Data from community forums may be difficult to analyze. Just as in the case of open-ended questions, there may be as many different opinions expressed as there are speakers. It may be difficult, or impossible, to categorize statements, other than as single person opinions. Unless the issues are simple and clear-cut, nuances in the participants' statements may make analysis questionable at best, and misleading at worst.

Charette Process

A charette is an intense, iterative process for reaching consensus in a short period of time. The term comes from medieval France, where engineers used a *charette*, or cart, to carry construction blueprints to various authorities for approval. As each authority ordered revisions, the engineers would revise the plans and resubmit them, repeating the process until all agreed to the plans and the project could go forward.

Today, the process is carried out using a representative sample of community members who study together, plan together, and solve problems together. The purpose is to reach consensus on which issues to address, how to address them, and who will be responsible for seeing that plans are carried out. Just as with the medieval construction plans, the process is iterative. A beginning idea or strategy, must be molded or fine-tuned to address an identified need and to meet general approval. A charette is an effective planning technique for three basic reasons:

1. Planning is completed in a compressed time frame.

2. Participation includes broad-based representation and expertise.
3. The process is based on consensus and cooperation; willingness to compromise and to work as a team for the general good are key ingredients for success.

Citizens's Planning Conference Model. The community of Ankeny, Iowa, has used the charette process successfully to approach community-wide problem solving and planning.[42] It is an integral component of its five-phase Citizens' Planning Conference Model. Each step in the process provides information or suggests planning activities for the next step.

Step 1. Needs assessment. In Ankeny, the process begins with a needs assessment, the Community Betterment Survey, conducted by the Community Schools, under the joint signatures of the mayor and superintendent of schools. A variety of public and private agencies, including the Chamber of Commerce, library, ministerial association, United Way, and YMCA, are sponsoring agencies and are included in the assessment. Randomly selected community members are asked to respond to queries about the community in general and about the specific sponsoring agencies.

Step 2. Pre-conference planning. During this phase the results of the needs assessment are analyzed, and a representative sample of community members, from teens through senior citizens, are identified to take part in a Citizens' Planning Conference. An initial concern was that it would be difficult to get community members to give up two to four days to participate in the conference. Great care was given to participant selection and to limiting the agenda of the

The Citizens' Planning Conference Model

This planning model is based on a five-phase cycle of activities: (1) needs assessment; (2) pre-conference planning; (3) citizens' planning conference; (4) implementation; and (5) reassessment and evaluation. It is a continuous process in which the evaluation of results of one cycle prepares the way for a new round of needs assessment.

A charette process is used for the critical conference phase of activities. Based on consensus and cooperation, the charette is a problem-solving working session conducted in a compressed time frame, using broad-based community representation.

Community members are brought together for two to four days to work collectively to prioritize the needs identified in the assessment phase, develop plans to meet those needs, and identify and recruit community members to be responsible for implementing those plans.

first conference. That charette was so successful, today the vast majority of community members are willing participants.

Step 3. Citizens' planning conference. Conducted as a charette process, the focus of the conference is to prioritize the needs identified in the assessment phase, develop plans to meet those needs, and identify and recruit community members to be responsible for implementing the plans. The conference is an iterative problem-solving session: each round of discussions and activities moves the group closer to consensus on priorities and plans.

Logistics are an important ingredient in the conference. Each round of the charette process produces a new set of working papers for group discussion. Staff

and equipment, including computers and copy machines, must be available to process materials constantly for resubmission to the group. It is an intense process since discussions must lead to consensus by the end of the two- to four-day conference.

4. Implementation. The implementation phase begins during the conference when those responsible for implementing plans are tentatively identified. Full implementation takes place over an extended period, with separate timelines for each activity. Some goals may be readily achieved, while others require an extended period and may need to be reviewed during the next planning conference.

5. Reassessment and evaluation. The final phase is a review of the entire process and its achievements. This evaluation of progress in terms of community improvement leads naturally into a new round of activities with a new community-wide needs assessment.

One complete cycle of activities may take three to five years. Obviously, implementation of the model is a long-term commitment to work toward community improvement. Ankeny's success in using this process stems from the broad-based involvement of the entire community.

The Ankeny school system has taken the lead as coordinator of the process; the community education department provides the skills and experience to serve as catalyst for the Citizens' Planning Conference. The model is promoted by the state department of education and is being implemented in other communities in Iowa and in other states.

Delphi Technique

A round-robin of activities is the prime characteristic of the delphi technique. The process can be used with a random group of participants, a representative sample of a population, or with a selected group of significant players, i.e., policy makers, administrators, clients, practitioners, or any group significant to the issue at hand. It is similar to a charette in that each round results in revisions. The procedures differ, however, in their time frame: a charette is a short-term, intense process, while a delphi has distinct time periods between rounds of activities. Time periods can vary from a few hours, to a few days, weeks, or even months. In the charette, a predetermined list of needs is presented for prioritization. The first round of the delphi is often used to establish the initial list.

The simplest way to conduct a delphi is to gather a small group of people, present them with a task, and have each individual, or group, sort a deck of cards into a preferred priority system. Although discussions can take place during this procedure, the goal is not to reach immediate verbal consensus. Following this first round, results are reported back to the group.

In the second round, group members are asked to reconsider their personal priorities in light of the initial results. They are asked to re-sort their cards/priorities; a second analysis and reporting back to the group occurs. Three rounds of sorting, reporting back, and reconsideration are typically employed, although more or fewer rounds may be necessary to reach a general accord. Absolute consensus is not required; results are tallied to provide a composite outcome.

A written format can also be used in conducting a delphi. An example is a community education delphi

survey conducted in 1993[43] to identify issues that would have an impact on the National Community Education Association's strategic planning process. A written questionnaire was mailed to three groups of community educators: directors or liaisons of state community education associations, community educators in state departments of education; and professional staff of state or regional community education support centers.

In round one, participants were asked to identify issues significant to the future development of community education. Responses were analyzed and synthesized to produce a composite view of the future state of community education. During round two, this futures scenario was presented to the same group of participants, who were asked to assess its likelihood and its impact on the movement. In round three, the results of

Delphi Technique

A delphi is based on a round-robin of activities, with each round producing revision. Distinct time periods, ranging from a few hours to several months, separate the rounds. The first round can begin with an established list of needs to be addressed or can be used to establish that initial list.

The simplest delphi gathers together a small group of people, presents them with a task, and has each individual, or group, sort a deck of cards into a preferred priority system. Although discussions can take place during this procedure, the goal is not to reach an immediate verbal consensus.

In the second round, group members are asked to reconsider their personal priorities in light of first round results. They re-sort priorities and these results are again analyzed and reported back to the group. Three rounds of sorting, reporting back, and reconsideration are typically used, although more or fewer may be necessary to reach a general accord.

round two were reported, and participants were asked to reassess the likelihood of the scenario.

A delphi technique has great potential for eliciting the hopes, aspirations, and emotions of participants while providing a reality base, or group check, on statements and projections.

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CHAPTER 4

RENEWING THE PROCESS

Strategic planning is an unending process. Internal variables—personnel, capacity, resources, purpose, vision—may change, requiring changes in future plans. The external environment may change rapidly; changes in demographics, economics, needs, resources, and competition must be dealt with and put into the perspective of the organization's future.

Deciding to undertake strategic planning for a program, school, district, organization, or community, is a choice to meet the future. The first attempt may seem difficult, especially a first attempt at assessment. But the tools of each step can be made simple and manageable by restricting the parameters or limiting the area of planning. An initial success can lead to more comprehensive undertakings.

Once begun, the planning process provides its own rewards. Ultimately, it can develop into the *habit* of planning, into the normal way of doing business. With strategic planning, it is normal to deal with and anticipate change.

The tools described in this brief monograph can help begin the process of organizational renewal and adaptability. Start simple, appreciate the results, and strategic planning will soon become part of your ever-changing business as usual.

EPILOGUE:

A WORD ABOUT COMMUNITY EDUCATION

Community education is a way for people to enhance their lives and communities through learning and collaboration. It provides opportunities for community members, schools, and other organizations to become partners in addressing educational and community concerns. It is a practical philosophy that enables communities to identify problems and resources, and create their own futures by providing learning opportunities to meet the needs of various life stages, by developing leadership skills, and by facilitating the efficient and effective delivery of services. Within this philosophy, people—as individuals and as collaborative communities—are seen as capable of assessing their own needs and developing strategies to shape their social, political, and economic environments. This view is based on a fundamental belief in America's form of participatory democracy in which people have the right, and obligation, to be involved in making the decisions that affect their lives. Rather than accepting an externally imposed environment, individuals and communities are encouraged to meet and deal with their present environment while working to improve their future.

At heart, community education supplies an answer to the question, "Where does the school end and life

outside begin? There is no distinction between them... [The community school] is, in effect, the place where learning and living converge."[1] This outlook, expressed by community school pioneer Elsie Clapp, leads to a synergism of school and community, to a learning community. The school, acting as a community center, is the site of activity for agencies and institutions committed to meeting community needs and

Components of Community Education

Lifelong Learning

- Understanding that learning continues throughout life.
- Providing formal and informal learning opportunities through all of life's stages.
- Providing programs and services for all community members, including opportunities for inter-generational interaction.

Community Involvement

- Promoting a sense of civic responsibility.
- Providing opportunities for community members to develop and use their leadership skills.
- Promoting the inclusion of diverse populations in all aspects of community life.
- Encouraging community involvement in local decision making.

Efficient Use of Resources

- Utilizing fully the community's physical, financial, technical, and human resources to meet diverse needs.
- Reducing duplication of services by promoting collaborative relationships among schools, organizations, and agencies.

Adapted by the National Community Education Marketing Plan Committee (1994) from the Principles of Community Education, Larry Horyna (Utah Department of Education) and Larry E. Decker (University of Virginia), National Coalition for Community Education, 1992.

expanding learning opportunities for all.[2] Today's community school is open beyond the traditional school day to provide academic, extracurricular, recreational, health, social services, and work force preparation programs for people of all ages. Community educators, traditionally and philosophically, have looked to the community to provide direction for the type of programs and services needed.

As the field has developed, community educators have come to rely on the tools of planning and assessment to facilitate their process orientation and focus on fulfilling community needs. In their 1977 text, *Planning and Assessment in Community Education*, Burbach and Decker describe planning as a sequential process that "begins with the setting of educational goals for the community and then progresses to the assessment and prioritization of community needs."[3] It is only after the goal-setting and assessment process is completed that programs are developed and services provided.

Changes in society have led to changes in communities, and community education has responded with a new generation of community educators.[4] An emerging paradigm moves beyond programmatic activities in the school setting to focus on organizational structure, leadership, and citizen involvement. The new community educators focus on the partnership that must exist between the school and the community. Acting as facilitators, they bring together public and private agencies to provide programs and services not only within the school setting but throughout the community. Community educators are being called to act as change agents, to take a proactive, futures approach, to envision schools as multiservice agencies acting in

affiliation with other agencies and governmental units.[5]

The interrelatedness of school and community and the need for lifelong learning are gaining widespread acceptance within education and in the broader political arena. Many of the components of *Goals 2000* reflect this viewpoint. In fact, *Goals 2000* begins by emphasizing a parent's and a community's responsibility to meet children's needs before they enter school. For years, community education has sponsored parenting classes, pre-school programs, and school volunteer programs involving parents and other community mem-

Goals 2000

I. All children will arrive at school ready to learn.

II. The high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.

III. Students will master challenging subject matter.

IV. Teachers will have access to training programs to improve their skills.

V. U.S. students will be first in the world in math and science.

VI. All adult Americans will be literate, and able to compete in a global economy.

VII. Every school will be free of drugs and violence.

VIII. Every school will strive to increase parental involvement and participation in children's education.

bers. The school environment is a reflection of a community's environment, and creating safer, better, more effective schools means involving and improving our communities. Meeting children's needs often means meeting a variety of family needs. In Florida's Full-Service Schools and Kentucky's Family and Youth Service Centers, community educators are acting in a facilitating role between school, family, and health, social services, and other agencies.

Two of the goals relate directly to adult educational needs: the continued professional development of teachers and the training and retraining of others in the workforce. Continuing education, workforce preparation, GED, and literacy programs have been offered through community education for more than 50 years.

As states and localities adopt and implement *Goals 2000*, they will choose strategies that meet their specific situations, needs, strengths, and resources. Community education, with its history of working with communities to identify and meet goals, can be a useful resource in this reform movement. In fact, as the K-12 system increasingly recognizes the importance of parent and community involvement in the revitalization of schools, the skills of community educators and their practical, community-serving program are emerging as mainstream educational initiatives.

For more information on community education, contact:
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